# "Citizen's Project" claiming to protect diversity in Colorado Springs

## What does it all..."mean" (if anything)?

**by Bob Campbell**

From its very inception way back in 1871, Colorado Springs has been of a conservative bent both socially and politically. General Palmer -- Colorado Springs' founder -- insisted, for example, that the city charter expressly prohibit the sale of alcaholic beverages within the city limits.

Any "Little Londoner" who preferred whetting his whistle (or otherwise "letting his hair down") to High Tea was obliged to hoof it three miles away to that den of iniquity, Colorado City.

The personality of Colorado Springs still bears that conservative stamp, but the current brouhaha over Amendment 2 and the increasing political muscle-flexing of (for lack of a better term) the Religious Right has tended to put an unusually rapid spin on our town's inherent conservatism.

Lately, in fact -- whether rightly or wrongly -- we've been getting a lot of national -- in fact, international -- attention about alleged intolerance and being "the hate capital of the United States."

In alarm over and disaffection with the escalating anger on every side and with what they perceived as a concerted attempt by certain groups to tilt the political balance to "the Far Right," a group of 20-30 Springs residents organized a movement in May of last year they named "Citizen's Project."

Founders Amy Divine and Doug Triggs say that two events occuring in the same week last April catalyzed them into organizing the group.

One was a lawsuit brought by

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several parents against the Woodland Park school system in an effort to halt what they called "pagan influences" by the teaching of Greek and Roman mythology. The other was a last-minute barring of participation by "gay, lesbian and pagan" panelists in a symposium at a District 11 school that had been organized to celebrate cultural, social, religious and artistic diversity within the Colorado Springs community.

Alarmed that -- as they perceived it -- a vocal minority was being permitted to set the agenda for the majority, Divine and Triggs began contacting friends and acquaintances.

The circle soon began putting out a bi-monthly informational newsletter, "Freedom Watch," and holding monthly meetings that, to their surprise, seemed to galvanize an enormous groundswell of enthusiasm. In a 10-month span membership grew from 30 to over 5,000.

The group's first general meeting on the evening of January 24 at the Fine Arts Center attracted an overflow crowd of more than 1,200, with people lining the walls and aisles for lack of seats.

Citizen's Project representative meanwhile, have been interviewed by media groups as diverse and far afield as Time, Newsweek, the British Broadcast System, National Public Radio, Associated Press, CBS's Street Stories, The New York Times and Washington Post, The Village Voice and MTV.

**What's it all about?**

According to Citizen's Project board members Amy Divine and Cheyenne Mountain resident Richard Skorman, owner of Poor Richard's, the group's primary purpose is to counter what they perceive as a growing trend of sanctioned intolerance.

They hope that the group, by means of their meetings and newsletters, can serve to "unmask" instances of what they perceive as attempts to impose an homogeneity on the community defined mostly by, they say, "'the Religious Right, meaning activist Christians of evangelical and fundamentalist persuasions."

One of their most frequent adversaries has been Focus on the Family. Spokesman Paul Hetrick objects, however, to their use of the term, "Religious Right."

"I think by their use of the term," he says, "that they mean the accumulated power, such as it is, of some 50 groups in this region having a religious orientation. In reality, though, very few of those groups are 'political' by any definition."

"By 'religious right,'" he asks, "do they mean Compassion International (a group engaged in famine relief)? Athletes in Action? The Navigators? They throw so many groups into this bucket that the term demands clarification."

Citizen's Group designates as their main areas of concern the schools, the political arena and Amendment 2.

In the schools, they express alarm about attempts in recent years to censor textbooks and curriculums to make school systems reflect what they call a "narrowly 'Christian' point of view."

"As the Woodland Park and D11 incidents indicate," says Skorman, "there's a lot of intimidation and fear out there. Sometimes all it takes is 20 angry phone calls from 'Religious Right' parents to make an understandably jittery principal enact a policy that doesn't really represent the majority view, or rescind one that doesn't represent the Religious Right view."

The group also expresses concern with the growing trend of so-called "stealth" candidates in the political arena -- a phomenon, they claim to be most closely associated with Pat Robertson's organization.

"The idea here," says Divine, "is to run candidates for office who pose as moderate Republicans in order to enhance their electability, but then push an often-extreme 'Christian' agenda once they get into office."

Their third main concern is Amendment 2, which they -- rightly or wrongly -- perceive as a selective erosion of civil rights championed most vociferously by -- but not only by -- Christian extremists of Fundamentalist and Evangelical persuasion.

Divine and Skorman adamantly insist, however, that Citizen's Project is neither anti-religious nor anti-"Christian," or even anti-conservative.

"Our problem," claims Divine, "is neither with the 'religious' nor 'the right' per se. Instead, it's with the so-called 'Religious Right' -- primarily Fundamentalist activists who wish to define the political agenda in order to impose their 'truth'" on the majority."

"Our membership includes a number of clergy and moderate Republicans, including a substantial number of people living in the 80906 area," they say, adding that "probably the large majority of our members would define themselves as 'Christian.'"

A curious observer at the January 24 meeting was City Council member John Hazlehurst.

"I'm basically a 'meeting junkie,'" he explains, "and I didn't have anything to do on a Sunday night, so I dropped by to see what was going on."

Having watched closely and thought about the matter, Hazlehurst senses that Citizen's Project may represents a substantial trend.

"That was probably the largest political event in Colorado Springs in recent years," he observes. "When was the last time you saw over 1,000 people gather in this town to talk politics?"

He also perceives it as a healthy development.

"I feel that the best way to get good public policy in local government is by involving a lot of people with different perspectives. By involving them in the political arena," he explains, "they have to meet and talk to the people they disagree with. That gives your opponent a human face, and whenever that happens you can usually locate some sort of common ground."

A Colorado Springs native, Hazlehurst, also claims to sense an attempt in recent years by the "Religious Right" to increase their power base.

"We've always had a settled, conservative majority here," he explains, but the political norm in this town is center-right. There's not a lot of elbow-room to either side. If you look at the political figures with any kind of longevity -- Mayor Isaac, say, or Joel Hefley -- you'd have to characterize them as moderate right."

"In this town, historically -- in American politics as a whole, in fact-- the party that siezes middle ground tends ultimately to prevail. In recent years, however, certain groups substantially more conservative than the majority have been attracted here, attempting to surf atop the less-conservative majority to amplify their influence.

"History has shown, however, that if the moderate majority of this city begins to feel itself moved farther right than it feels appropriate, it will react. I think that might account for the rapid growth of Citizen's Project."

"Citizen's Project," insist both Divine and Skorum, "is more interested in building bridges than erecting barricades," and Hetrick of Focus on the Family reports that several meetings betwen the two groups "proved beneficial in opening up dialogue."

"I think we can engage in good discussion and understand one another," he notes, "even if we can't achieve agreement in all things."

Anyone of whatever political persuasion can place themselves on the Citizen's Project mailing list by calling 685-9899.